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ABSTRACT

Writing courses which incorporate the tenets of "critical literacy" (such as the "difference" curriculum at the University of Texas at Austin) not only often fail to make students more aware of the role ideology plays in their culture, but also create profound new silences in the classroom--silences caused by political intimidation. Advocates of such courses seem inclined to design curricula in which most or all of the readings, assignments, and discussions represent or endorse values that conform to their political perspectives. Furthermore, these programs prove in practice to be inadequate at instructing students in logic and writing. The "difference" curriculum at UT-Austin was objectionable because it seemed to be deciding what politically correct perspectives on significant political and social issues should be. The ensuing controversy could have been avoided by: (1) creating the program more slowly and systematically; (2) listening to those who questioned its viability without labelling them as racist and sexist; (3) acknowledging that even the ideology of a program on racism and sexism is challengeable; and (4) accommodating different approaches to teaching writing into a multicultural syllabus. A truly exciting multicultural first year writing syllabus would enable instructors to bring different cultural problems, new groups, alternative readings, and different ideas into the classroom without having to refashion the entire curriculum. (PRA)

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John Ruszkiewicz

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You have probably heard about E 306 at the University of Texas. Charles Sykes, author of Profscam and The Hollow Men, recently described the controversy over our first year writing course at UT-Austin as the single most important debate in American education today. I think--even hope--he's exaggerating, but perhaps he isn't. The battle over our course in Rhetoric and Composition has been covered--with varying degrees of accuracy--by The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Washington Post, The New Republic, The Atlantic Monthly, Chronicles, US News, and on and on. George Will has written a column about it; our graduate students have been asked about the debate in their job interviews. One thing I hope we have all learned from the experience is that First Year English is one college course that means a great deal to many people. It can't be tampered with lightly, at least not at a major state institution. Students, faculty in other departments, parents, alumni, and administrators all have opinions about first year composition--and all deserve to be heard.

It has been reported in various quarters, including in an anonymous report to the AAUP, that I was opposed to the new course from the outset, but the record shows that I repeatedly urged the policy committee responsible for curriculum revision to run pilot sections of the syllabus on "Difference" before offering it more generally.

My concern for pilot sections wasn't tendentious, nor unrelated to the particular subject matter of the class. First year writing classes

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that emphasized race, class, gender issues were already being offered at University of Texas; graduate students and faculty had, in fact, been bending the disintegrating first year syllabus to their academic interests for several years, teaching classes on racism and, more frequently, sexism or women's issues.

Unlike every other member of the committee that approved the new "difference" curriculum at the University of Texas, I had actually observed a dozen or more such politicized sections and knew firsthand that they weren't working well. These assistant Instructors typically were making two crucial errors: they were either unable to separate their personal politics from their classroom discussions or they were uncertain how to merge their political interests with instruction in writing. Moreover, they seemed to have virtually no vocabulary for talking to students about matters of composition: invention, organization, paragraphing, revising, sentence structure, vocabulary--you name it; they didn't know it. Several hadn't the slightest idea of how to make an assignment. Instructors were getting little help from the existing syllabus, a thirteen-page handout inviting new teachers to invent their own courses after deciding whether they were structuralists or post-structuralists.

Is it surprising, then, that teaching evaluations were dropping precipitously in our program as more and more graduate instructors were writing a political agenda into their courses and fewer and fewer were receiving detailed training in rhetoric and writing instruction? Clearly, we needed fresh approaches.

Yet the approach we adopted seemed to be the very one causing the problem--less writing, more politics. So I was uneasy with the pedagogy

and the philosophy of the new syllabus, but I was willing to support the reform it represented provided that the syllabus would be tested in a sensible pilot program. However the supporters of the course simply refused to allow it to be subjected to any systematic scrutiny.

They also insisted that only one anthology would be used in the class, a social studies text by Paula Rothenberg entitled Racism and Sexism. I could not imagine teaching from the book since it represented to my mind a narrow political perspective and an inadequate rendering of history and law. I suggested that the committee either reconsider the adoption of Racism and Sexism or at least offer a few alternatives--I suggested eight anthologies designed expressly for writing courses, including books such as Emerging Voices and Rereading America. But the committee majority, some even arguing that the Rothenberg collection was balanced (a claim Rothenberg herself doesn't make), refused to entertain other choices, breaking a venerable tradition in our program of offering instructors a selection of texts.

Providing even a single alternative text would have quieted the fears I and many others had about the potentially coercive nature of the "difference" curriculum.

The refusal of the committee to accommodate alternatives to the political perspective the course espoused deepened my doubts about their motives for offering the class. Was it to provide an insight into the civil rights questions of the sixties and seventies, as the department's press releases to the media suggested; or was it to politicize and radicalize students, as supporters of the course declared at campus rallies and in cultural studies seminars? Comments by members of the committee indicated the narrowness of proponents' ideological

perspective. "What's the alternative to this approach?" one indignant faculty member inquired, "Fascism?" When I suggested that other perspectives on issues such as androgyny and affirmative action were available, another committee member wanted to know whether any reputable writers had argued such contrary opinions. After the meeting, I supplied her with a list of about twenty names--including I believe Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Diane Ravitch, Sidney Hook, Arthur Schlesinger, and so on. A third member of the committee even queried whether I would be happier if all the readings for the course were from a right-wing perspective.

That such a question could be asked, however, suggested to me precisely how unaware the opposing members of the committee were to differing perspectives. The only alternative to the course that they could imagine was not the more balanced and politically challenging version I was seeking, but a curriculum as badly skewed to the right as their own was to the left.

That wasn't the only problem bothering me. Another was that every assistant instructor in the program would be required to teach the new syllabus--even if he or she had three, four, or five years of composition experience and had developed a successful approach to teaching first year English. The fact that some of these assistant instructors in the program had more experience with English 306 than members of the committee advocating the new course didn't seem to matter.

The narrowing of choices went further. At a committee meeting, the director of the program refused to allow the new syllabus to support any approach to composition except one emphasizing the analysis of legal

cases. Those of us who preferred rhetorical or generic approaches to composition were left out in the cold. The fact that many of us had taught writing successfully for years without incorporating race, class, gender, or legal briefs into our syllabi was deemed irrelevant. The program would not tolerate dissent--a curious stance for a curriculum about difference. And a disturbing one. If instructors would not be permitted to vary from the prescribed program, how free would students be to express their beliefs and ideas in the course?

True, as a member of the regular faculty I could have technically taught any version of E 306 I wanted. But I have always taught the departmental syllabus whenever such a syllabus existed. To do otherwise would be--in my opinion--to compromise my academic responsibilities and, more important, to break faith with the graduate students and (at any earlier time) lecturers compelled to use any such syllabus. And so, despite having dedicated now almost twenty years to first year English and having written three books on the subject, I would be unable to teach the course anymore at the University of Texas unless I taught it in a way I found pedagogically and philosophically questionnable.

I could go into much more detail about the political battle surrounding the curriculum on "difference." But the basic point I want to make for you is this: the dispute never ought to have happened. None of the departmental opponents of the class were opposed to writing courses that illuminated and explored the cultures, experiences, and problems of minority and ethnic groups (including women); we have had such courses at the University of Texas for years--at least we did during the years that I directed first year English. What we resisted

was a program that seemed to be deciding what politically correct perspectives on significant political and social issues should be.

The controversy could have been avoided simply by creating a program more slowly, systematically, and thoughtfully--by really listening to those who questioned its viability (and not labelling them racist and sexist), by acknowledging that even a program on racism and sexism entails in a challengeable ideology (contrary to what one supporter of the curriculum believed, issues like affirmative action <u>are</u> subject to debate), and by accommodating different approaches to teaching writing into a multicultural syllabus. One of the future problems of our new program is that the syllabus that finally appeared is so complex that it not only stifles the creativity of students and teachers, but is too rigid to accommodate new topics and subjects. A truly exciting multicultural first year writing syllabus would enable instructors to bring different cultural problems, new groups, alternative readings, different ideas into the classroom semester after semester without having to refashion the entire curriculum. Ours does not.

In my more cynical moments I think that the most effective way to have opposed the program would have been to silently let it go forward, allowing it to collapse in time under its own ideological weight and excesses. That approach would have cost much less spirit, much less heartache. This struggle has been--for many involved, I think--the most difficult, costly, often disillusioning experience of our academic careers. But to remain silent would have been professionally irresponsible. Right or wrong, I felt that I had to speak out in the interests of students likely to be--even more than some of my

colleagues--silenced by the ideological threats this course potentially embodied.

That point was best made by a tutor working with students already in modified versions of the politicized composition course taught during the summer of our discontent--courses focusing on social issues and multiculturalism. He writes:

> One evening I spent an hour tutoring three students who were assigned to write papers stating and "defending" their opinion" on whether or not students should be required to take special classes which would teach the histories and cultures of minority ethnic groups that have been ignored in mainstream educational institutions. They were all writing their papers arguing the affirmative even though they believed strongly, that no one should be forced to take such courses. Such blatant and extreme cases of writing for the teacher are, in my experience, rare--especially among freshmen. Usually, I tell people I tutor to write what they think because, not only is it right to do so, but better writing almost always results. This summer I was repeatedly told by my students that honest writing would result in a lower grade. Whether this is true or not, I couldn't tell, but the students sure believed it. I suspect that this abandonment of intellectual integrity has profound effects. Students tend to become cyncial quickly. They also conclude that whether or not one plays fair doesn't matter. What counts is following the rules of the person with the power to enforce them.

On these grounds, then, I challenge the assumption that writing courses informed by the tenets of "critical literacy" make students more aware of the role ideology plays in their culture. I believe that instructors in such classes rarely acknowledge or critique their own under ideological constraints, believing perhaps that their non-foundational epistemologies protect them from authoritarian postures in the classroom. Yet such beliefs often lead them to assume that their understanding of social realities is more sophisticated and honorable than either that of their students or of their colleagues who question the primacy of political agendas in writing classes.

In practical terms, advocates of critical literacy seem inclined to design curricula in which most or all of the syllabus readings, assignments, and discussions represent or endorse a single set of values and authorize conversations only on subject matters (e.g. race, sex, ethnicity, difference) that conform to the political perspectives of the instructor, program, or course administrators. Quite often the architects of such programs are themselves unable to articulate or understand the positions of the opposition except in terms which reduce them to crude stereotypes. Denying choice to their students and ironically to themselves, advocates of critical literacy in fact just create profound new silences in the classroom--silences caused by political intimidation. And the vaunted post-structural epistemologies through which they authorize their programs prove in practice to be less subtle at instructing students in logic than the most elementary forms of traditional dialectic and less adept at teaching writing than even current-traditional pedagogies.